Interview with Dwight Dickinson

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

AMBASSADOR DWIGHT DICKINSON

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This is an interview with The Honorable Dwight Dickinson, the former United States Ambassador to the Republic of Togo, on May 11, 1988 at the residence of Thomas S. Estes, who is conducting the interview on behalf of the Association for Diplomatic Studies. The Ambassador and I are old friends and colleagues in the Foreign Service and consequently this interview will be marked by its informality.

Q: Dwight, you wanted to make a general statement before going into specifics. You are now on.

DICKINSON: Well, Tom, going back to what you said about our being colleagues, I'd like to say something about you first. You were senior to me and you were an Ambassador earlier than I was and I always admired you a great deal and that leads me to say what I want to say about the Foreign Service.

One of the very best things about it was one's colleagues. My best friends to this day are almost entirely friends I made in the Foreign Service. This may sound a little fortuitous, but you can't talk about your career in the Foreign Service without saying what it means to you and to me. I know it meant really everything. I enjoyed it. I enjoyed everything I did in it. If I

could do it over again, I think I'd do it exactly the same way. It might have been possible to go farther than I did, but I'm happy the way I did it.

One of the things I think we're supposed to tell you is a little bit about our background in the Foreign Service, how we got into it. Very briefly I got into it by being a Navy junior. My father was stationed in the Far East, and I lived two and a half years in the Philippines and China—most of it in the Philippines—I began to take an interest in what was going on as the Japanese were beginning to harass the Chinese when we lived in Chefoo. Every time a Chinese gunboat came in there were two Japanese gunboats right along side it and it wasn't long before the Manchurian adventure began. I didn't really know much about all that but I did discover there was something called a Consulate and that there were Consuls and that was in the back of my mind when later on, as a beginning college student, I began to think about what I'd like to do. I had another really silly reason for wanting to be in the Foreign Service. I collected stamps and I was fascinated with geography— fascinated with other countries. And that led me directly to the Foreign Service.

My early career was not very distinguished. I had five years in the Navy and I think that delayed my development in the Foreign Service. Being a Navy junior and then spending five years in the Naval Reserve during World War II, I learned a great deal about organization, but I also learned to carry out orders. It never occurred to us in the Navy to question something we were told to do, and I think I went into the Foreign Service with that view. I'm not encouraging young people to be disobedient, or to be arrogant, but I do think one could have more ideas than I had. I was basically trying to carry out what I thought someone else wanted me to do.

Eventually, of course, as most of us in the Foreign Service probably did, I came to the realization that foreign policies were not made on the basis of US national interest but on the basis of US political interest, or the interest of a particular party that was making the decision. I'm convinced that if a president were ever to rely really on the Foreign

Service, on its information, and on its views, and to encourage it to give its views, he would probably do a darn sight better job than he does. But I believe foreign policy decisions are made, coming from the White House as we now see with this National Security Advisor who much of the time is more powerful than the Secretary of State—let's say all the time, except when Henry Kissinger moved from the National Security Council to the Secretaryship—but it just seems to me that the decisions are based on what is good for the party for the moment, what will get you elected, what will give you a high profile. And I don't think that they're based on an objective analysis of what really is in the US interest.

Q: That's very interesting Dwight. I'm going to check back now to make sure that your voice level is right and that we're recording your views properly.

That's fine, that's fine, Dwight. Now why don't you highlight a few of your assignments before you were appointed Ambassador that you think may have a bearing on the objective of this oral history, or on your philosophy regarding the Foreign Service. I'll suggest a few but please pick your own if you prefer. For example, as you observe the situation in Lebanon the past few years, have you recalled some incidents during your tour there as Economic Officer in '54-'56 that you would consider clues to the future of that country?

DICKINSON: Well, Tom, 1954-56 was really a very peaceful time in Lebanon. The seeds of the disaster which has befallen Lebanon were there. As I'm sure you know, the Chamber of Deputies was elected on the basis of a confessional membership, that is, there would be a certain number of Christian Maronites, a certain number of Greek Orthodox, a certain number of Shia, a certain number of Sunnis, a certain number of Druze—even two or three Armenian deputies. This was based on a census that had been taken sometime before 1954, maybe considerably, maybe 1948— I'm not sure— I shouldn't even mention the date, I don't know when it was, and it was based on the number of Christian Lebanese who existed, I believe, and it probably included many who lived outside the country. (Note: I have checked this point, since saying the above,

and find that this political mosaic was based on the “National Pact” of 1943.) At that time there were more Christian Lebanese living than Muslim Lebanese. I don't know whether that's true now, but many of them lived outside the country. Lebanon was unable ever to have another census; it was unwilling and unable to face another census. This resulted in the Maronite Christians having the presidency; this was assigned to them. The Sunnis having the Prime Ministership. The Shia the Speakership, and as I remember, at that time the Druze had to have the Minister of Defense, or Minister of War. I think that may have changed but that was the way it was then.

The other aspect of Lebanon that already existed in '54-'56 was the presence of some 70,000 to 90,000, as I remember, Palestinian refugees who had fled there in 1948. They had confidently intended to return to Palestine after the Arab armies had defeated the Israelis, the Jews. That, of course, never happened; it never has. They were just sitting there, doing nothing, bearing children. The Lebanese were making no effort to integrate them; no other country was interested in them. The children, as I say, were beginning to be born—the children that must now have children who were born in camps. Nothing was done for them except through the United Nations Relief & Works Agency (UNRWA), to which we were the largest contributor by far, as I recall.

Q: Excuse me. Would you spell out that UNWRA?

DICKINSON: Yes. Its UNRWA and I believe its the United Nations Relief & Works Agency. I'm glad you clarified that.

The result of all this is that after the years and years in a way of neglect the Palestinians didn't want to be integrated; the other Arabs, the Lebanese, and others, didn't want to integrate them. But as a result they've had nothing to do but grow up in these camps filled with hatred, and we see the result today. Lebanon also, because of its many sects and parties, became a very weak country and therefore a fertile ground for the Palestinians to develop their own resistance in. I won't go any farther with that because there are so

many people that are going to be interviewed in this system who know a great deal more about it than I, but I'm recalling the seeds of this, and it was the Palestinian presence in Lebanon, I'm convinced, which brought about the destruction of government in Lebanon. (Note: Although I failed to say so, the disintegration of authority in Lebanon finally came about when the PLO leadership and military, driven out of Jordan by King Hussein, moved to Lebanon and established themselves in the already festering refugee camps.)

Q: Okay. You spoke about the UNRWA, the Relief & Works Agency. If you haven't any other earlier assignments you'd like to comment on, would you go to your assignment to the United Nations headquarters in New York and follow that up with your assignment to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. The two seem to follow each other.

DICKINSON: Yes, they did. One followed the other, unfortunately I preferred the first. This is not sequential in my experience. That wasn't my immediate posting after Lebanon, but its worth a great deal talking about. My United Nations experience, which consisted of membership in the delegation for the 15th General Assembly session, where I represented the African Bureau (I was brought back from Morocco for that purpose and returned to Morocco) and then my membership in the regular delegation from mid-1962 until the end of 1965. These two experiences were to me the most fascinating and by far the most interesting in my Foreign Service career.

Q: Excuse me, Dwight. What's the date of this assignment?

DICKINSON: The assignment—well, I had four months in '60, and then in June '62 until January '66. The second time, I was on the regular staff of the Mission, I was called a Political Adviser. I worked for people younger than I, maybe even junior. And this is an interesting key to service at the UN. You have to be willing to do whatever has to be done and not have any sense of rank or importance. I remember Foreign Service Officers who came there with the exalted idea that they'd be terribly important advisers, and they were sent on errands the same way I was to round up a recalcitrant delegate who wasn't in his

seat. Some people minded and some didn't. I liked it, but I also learned to like something else, and that was that during the General Assembly, at least, the place was like a 7-ring circus. There were seven committees. Each committee had an Executive Officer. I was Executive Officer, for a good part of the time, of (our delegation to) the Fourth Committee, which was the committee on non-self-governing territories. The representative was usually a politico. Part of the time I had Sidney Yates, a failed—he wasn't failed—the Democrats had talked him into running against Everett Dirksen for the Senate. He lost his (Congressional) seat and he spent the next two years as our representative on the Fourth Committee and the Committee on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, and would go home every Wednesday to Chicago to attend to his law business and leave me in charge of the committees for the next Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday and I had a lot of fun. But I learned what really one could do. This is where I learned that one's own ideas might have some value.

The way we worked there, I think I mentioned this to you one time Tom, you thought was interesting. As a matter of fact, you asked me the question, “How did we get our instructions?” We got our instructions by asking for them. Every evening after the work was over, you'd go and have a drink at whatever reception was on—there was a reception practically every night of the year—and then you'd go back to the Mission and request your instructions. And in the morning somebody would have them for you from Washington. There was very little time to clear them with all quarters so half the time you were told just to go ahead and do your best. When I went back to the Mission, which was across the street, I would call the Desk Officer—he wasn't called a Desk Officer- -but whatever officer was responsible in the United Nations Affairs in the Department, and we would discuss what we really ought to be doing. I would then send him a telegram confirming that, although it didn't say so. It just asked for instructions and suggested them, and in the morning he'd send me a telegram. When I got to work there was a telegram giving me the instructions I'd requested and that he and I had agreed on. And we seldom had to go very

high because there was so much going on with seven committees. Anyway, that was a great deal of fun.

Perhaps one of the most marvelous things about working at the UN was working for Adlai Stevenson. Adlai had just the attitude toward career advisers, career foreign affairs advisers, that naturally I and many of my colleagues would think anybody should have, any political appointee. He trusted us, he believed us, he listened to us. He would express his views but he listened, and then he would help you to get done what you wanted to get done.

Of course, the way he helped the most was by being so terribly eloquent. I remember one occasion—and everybody at the United Nations admired him. He couldn't get out of an elevator without all the other Ambassadors making way and saying, “You go first, don't stand in the line, Governor, go up to the head of the line.” Of course, he wouldn't do that, but they didn't even want him to wait behind them to shake hands with the host. They had tremendous respect for him.

But what he did, I can best give an example by the fact that when we had—I think it was 1965—when we and the British and the Belgians decided that we had to go into Stanleyville in the then ex-Belgian Congo, now Zaire, to rescue several hundred foreigners who were held by Simba guerrillas and being mistreated by them, some had been killed. We provided the transport. We landed at St. Helena; we provided the transport for Belgian paratroopers. Britain provided the staging area at St. Helena off the African coast. And then we flew from there the Belgian paratroopers in to Stanleyville and all of the hostages were rescued and I don't believe that any at all were killed in the rescue. Some had already been killed; maybe a few were but it was absolutely essential that the rest be rescued. Our method at this point was to call a Security Council meeting since we were planning all this. We called it first to make our report. I was assigned to call Ralph Bunche, then Under- Secretary General (for Special Political Affairs)—call him at 5:00 in the morning and inscribe for the day, and I did so, and at 9:00 a.m. or whatever it was, we had

our meeting. Well, after several days of this we got to our big point and we got a speech from Washington for Adlai to give. Several of us read it, and it was just awful. The person who had written it had just been assigned to write it; he knew nothing special about the situation. So I volunteered to rewrite the speech and I was told, “fine”. I was told that Adlai would be in—this was a Saturday, I guess—and I was told Adlai would come in on Sunday and read the speech and give it on Monday. So I went in, Adlai showed up all by himself, no ghost writers or anybody, and he read my speech over and every now and then he'd pick up a pencil and he'd scribble in a few words. After he'd given the speech and the New York Times reported it, every word they quoted was what he'd pencilled in. His lovely language just caught the eye immediately and made the point, and it was a wonderful thing to have a representative like that who could not only deliver it eloquently but could write the exciting parts of it.

I'd like to say one other thing. While I was there in the delegation I handled our participation in the Congo operation for nearly four years—three and a half years. We did that through Ralph Bunche and the Secretary General. We did not deal with the other elements of the Secretariat, and Charles Yost, of course, was actually dealing with this subject— Stevenson, Yost and I. Yost, by the way, for my money, is the finest Foreign Service Officer I ever met. He could accomplish in a quiet, modest way more than others ever did with fanfare and I'd like to pay that tribute to him right now. I had served with him already in Morocco but three and a half years at the UN were a wonderful experience—working for him and Adlai.

Well, I should say one other thing about the UN and that's this. I started to say this earlier and that is that many of my colleagues had no patience with the UN. I said some, because they didn't want to be messenger boys, but basically they didn't like losing votes. We lost our first (General Assembly) vote in 1960, the first major vote that we ever wanted to win. We lost it and that was over the establishment of the then Committee of Seventeen, which later became the Committee of Twenty-Four which was the Committee on the Decolonization of Dependent Territories— that's not the right name at all, it escapes me for

the moment. (Note: The Committee on the Granting of Independence to Colonial Countries and Peoples, on which I was, for 1964 and 1965, Alternate US Representative.) But the general American public, and many of the Foreign Service officers, looked upon the UN as the enemy, the place where we always lost the vote. And this is what I would like to say about that. What it seemed to me we were doing was, basically, we were dealing with the problems of the Third World countries.

Major problems, such as Vietnam—I wasn't there during Vietnam— but major problems, such as Vietnam didn't come up, they were beyond, they were too big a problem for the UN to try to deal with and the United States was too powerful to try to discipline or to have any effect on. But small countries, to me it seemed that small countries had a wonderful opportunity, the only one they would ever have to really make their voices known in the world. And they did this through the weight of their vote in the General Assembly where a coalition of Third World countries and the Soviet Bloc, which always took delight in supporting them whether it agreed with them or not, they would win all the votes and this would lead the American public to think the UN was anti-US It always seemed to me that the problem was that we were voting against the Third World countries on their issues, not they against us on our issues. And I think this is a fact that has been missed a great deal.

Another thing that the UN could and did do. If there was a problem that might have led to a minor war, and somebody didn't want a minor war, all he had to do was to go to the Security Council and the Security Council would say something and honor would have been saved and actual hostilities were prevented. There are many cases of this.

Q: That's very interesting. I knew so little about him (Stevenson). I'm glad to hear this and having served under Charlie Yost, I want to second what you said. I think he's one of our great, greats in the Foreign Service.

Now, tell us a little bit about your NATO, your North Atlantic Treaty Organization assignment where you had the rank of Minister.

DICKINSON: I'd like to contrast that with the UN. However, there's one thing I would like to say about the UN. Everyone will have noticed. This wasn't my experience, but it has just happened. When the Soviets decided to get out of Afghanistan, they accepted UN mediation, with the US, the Soviet Union, Pakistan and Afghanistan participating. They arranged the withdrawal through a UN mediator, under the leadership of a UN mediator. So even big countries can use the UN if they wish, and that's a marvelous example of it.

My experiences at the North Atlantic Council were very disappointing. I found right away that, although I admired many of the professional representatives of the other country members, it was pretty hard to stomach the actions of their governments. This was 1966-67, we were preparing during that entire period to leave Paris, to move the headquarters from Paris to Brussels, but we still had the work of the organization to complete, to carry out. And it always seemed to me that the other governments, particularly the Low Countries, the Danes perhaps, maybe the Canadians—I don't want to be unfair about the Canadians—but so many of them were really egging us on all the time to defend Europe but they were very, very unwilling to increase their own contributions to the defense of Europe. (Note: It wasn't money that made Canada weak, but rather its fear of offending de Gaulle, who was then wooing the province of Quebec.) That wasn't entirely what disappointed me. I was used to, at the UN, the parliamentary negotiations, the parliamentary maneuvering, the actual vote so that you had a clear answer, the verbatim reports of committee meetings, and the summaries of committee meetings. All of those things—you had something to work with. At the North Atlantic Council the system was there were no votes. Everything was done by consensus. The Secretary General, who was then Manlio Brosio of Italy, was a marvelous man. His English was quite good on social occasions, but when he was in the Council and when he was summarizing what had happened, he summarized it in such vague English that every delegation went back to its office and wrote its own report making things come out exactly the way they wanted. I don't know, that just disappointed me a great deal. The whole organization disappointed me and eventually, in fairly short order, I asked to go back to Africa.

Q: That leads me very nicely into the next question. In '67 you were sent to Rabat again, the second time. This time as Deputy Chief of Mission and Counselor of Embassy. Isn't it unusual to be assigned to the same post twice?

DICKINSON: It probably is and I wish we did it more often. I was worried about going back because I'd loved it. I'd been Political Counselor the first time. Before I went to the UN I spent three years there as Political Counselor and it was a great learning process for me. Incidentally, I was totally amazed when I first went there in 1959 as Political Counselor—I'd only been out of Lebanon for three years—I was amazed to discover that the Moroccans didn't give a damn what happened in the Middle East. They weren't the least bit interested. When I left Lebanon in '56 you couldn't have a conversation with a Lebanese Christian or a Muslim without their bringing up our support of Israel, for example. The Moroccans just didn't care. The government made all the right motions and the King was great at holding Arab conferences and taking initiatives, but the truth was that Morocco, which is the farthest away from the Middle East of the Arab countries, just didn't care. I don't think the people care very much. And I doubt they do to this day.

I've forgotten what your question was, Tom, how you phrased it.

Q: Wasn't it unusual to be assigned a second time, and then I was going to carry on. I think you've answered part of it.

DICKINSON: It was, but I'll tell you frankly I can say this. Henry Tasca was hard on DCMs and they were looking around for somebody who wanted to go there. When I said I wanted to go back to Africa...the way I did that I told them I wanted to go back to Africa and I heard that Joe Palmer, who was then Assistant Secretary for African Affairs, was coming through Paris so I sent word to him—he was at a conference in Tangier—and I sent word to him that I wanted to see him. He was pretty busy in Paris but he had time to let me ride in the taxi out to Le Bourget from which he was taking his plane back home. And in that time I told him I wanted to go, and he brought up the DCM job in either Tunis or Morocco. I

thought, “Well, you shouldn't go back to the same place. I'll take Tunis.” I got Morocco. What he did to me there was, they had Henry going through, Henry Tasca, on a trip and I had an hour in the airport with Henry. And I made one of the biggest mistakes in my life, I almost didn't get to Morocco. I told Henry that all he had to do when I got there was go on leave, that I knew the country so well. I'd had three years there and I knew everybody and he could just go on leave, when I got there. Well, I almost didn't get the job. What actually happened also was that after Henry chose me they had the '67 war and Dick Parker, who was Political Counselor in Cairo, was suddenly available. He was out of a job and my wife, I think, was home or something or other and she told me that she learned that Henry had decided he didn't want me after all and he preferred Dick. But then the Department wanted Dick so badly that Dick didn't get the job and I did. And that's how I got to be DCM in Morocco.

Dealing with Henry Tasca required great diplomacy. Henry was a marvelous man and very bright but he didn't trust people very much. He started out throwing a lot of little trials in my way and I mastered them all and eventually gained his confidence and we worked beautifully together and I'm sure he was responsible for my being appointed Ambassador to Togo.

Q: Well, you've led me again right into the next one because I was about to say your excellent high-level service in Africa was rewarded again in September in '67 with your appointment as Ambassador to the Republic of Togo. You certainly got your wish to go back to Africa. Would you like to talk a bit about our policy toward that country? How you carried it out, and if you can, what modifications you may have recommended? How did it work?

DICKINSON: Well, Tom, our policy probably is best described in the terms of Daniel Patrick Moynihan, one of “benign neglect.” It wasn't really benign neglect but there are literally dozens of countries in Africa. They're tiny, they're poor. They have really almost no effect on anything we do. We have very little commerce with them. The French, for

example, in the former French colonies, dominate, as you know, totally dominate the commerce. But our only real interest in the West African countries—our only real national interest, or American interest—seemed to be in getting their vote at the UN for things that were important to us, such as Korea—maintaining the UN force in Korea, maintaining the Chinese representation in the UN. The only thing that happened in the three and a half years I was in Togo that interested the Department at all was the moment at which Mr. Nixon decided to have his so-called opening to Communist China and at the same time had to pacify his right wing in American politics. So he laid on us, and through the Department, the difficult and losing chore of maintaining the recognition of Nationalist China by the countries we were in (and of keeping the nationalists in the UN). It wasn't so much recognition because the recognition took care of itself.

During that period whenever a country wanted to get rid of the Nationalist Chinese and substitute the representation of the Communist Chinese, all it had to do was to accept the Communist Chinese and the Nationalist immediately withdrew their ambassador. They never had to say, “Out with you”. The Nationalist Chinese policy was to withdraw immediately and it was a self defeating policy. They were going to lose out anyway but it was a self defeating policy, it didn't work. And that's exactly what happened in Togo. I remember that after Nixon had been to China the local newspaper—the only daily newspaper, Togo Presse—had an editorial in which they applauded the idea of Togolese recognition of Communist China and cited Mr. Nixon as their example. I remember they said, “Nixon isn't red, he's not even pink, and he's recognized China.” I'm not sure whether they were a little premature at that point.

But it was at this point that our government decided to try to maintain two representations at the UN—both the Nationalist Chinese and the Communist Chinese, neither of which would have accepted that. However, we were under great pressure to get the Togolese to vote for a two China policy of some kind, to keep the Nationalist Chinese in. And that resulted in a telephone call from Washington—from then Assistant Secretary of State David Newsom. He had never called me before; it would have been a waste of time if he

had. But he called me and told me we had to hold the Togolese firm. We didn't succeed but he later thanked me for my efforts. But that was the only time that the Department ever showed any interest in Togo.

I must say it was a joy to be Ambassador there. If Morocco was the country that (my wife and) I loved the most for its savage beauty, its raw beauty and its wonderful old cities, Togo was the country in which we were the happiest from the point of view of the people. The West African people are simply the nicest people there are. They're really lovely, delightful people. Somebody who has served in Lagos would dispute that and I would too, but in the countries that you and I served in, Tom, that's really true.

Q: ...absolutely, absolutely. Well, we've got a few minutes left here, do you have anything else you would like to add?

DICKINSON: Yes. I'd like to add something in a general sense, something that I feel very strongly about and it came upon me throughout the years in the Foreign Service.

For one thing, in the lower grades one is never told about CIA covert activities. The US press didn't tell us about them in those days, didn't know about them, or didn't tell us about them. But gradually peculiar things would happen and you would begin to realize that something was happening that you didn't know about. And eventually, of course, it all came out. The fact that we were not only carrying out covert political actions to carry out our objectives, but that we even—as we know in the case of Ollie North and Poindexter—we even had a covert foreign policy which was kept secret from others including Congress, and as far as possible, from the State Department. I'd just like to say here that I think we should totally do away with covert political and military actions. I think we lose a great deal more than we gain by them but since they're wrong to begin with, they don't work. They corrupt the people who carry them out, they end up by corrupting the presidents themselves. This isn't hindsight on my part. I have articles that I've written for the newspapers dating back at least into the '70s—mid-'70s—in which I predicted the

corruption of government leaders, including presidents, through their adherence and their dependence on this type of action. I would just like to put my voice in. I would do away with the capability, do away with it totally.

Q: Well, there certainly are many opinions on that and I think you'll probably find some others who would agree with you.

This has been a very interesting session for me, Dwight. As you know, I know something about your career, aside from preparing for this interview, but you have filled in a lot of spots that either I didn't remember and certainly some I didn't know about. I want to thank you and to put on a more formal note at the end.

Thank you for taking the time to record your views for this oral history project and thank you for your service to your country. I for one know its a pretty damn good one.

DICKINSON: Thank you, Ambassador Estes.

End of interview